

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Early China/Ancient Greece; Thinking through Comparisons by Steven Shankman and Stephen W. Durrant

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EARLY CHINA/ANCIENT GREECE; THINKING THROUGH COMPARISONS. Edited by Steven Shankman and Stephen W. Durrant. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002. 320 p.

Writing in 1690, Sir William Temple was one of the pioneers to bring early China and ancient Greece into comparison, particularly between Socrates and Confucius. Both philosophers used "the same design of reclaiming men from the useless and endless speculations of nature, to those of morality," says Temple, but Socrates seemed to focus "chiefly upon the happiness of private men or families," while Confucius concentrated "upon the good temperament and felicity of such kingdoms or governments as that was, and is known to have continued for several thousands of years; and may be properly called a government of learned men, since no other are admitted into charges of the state" (46). Even after three hundred years, we may still find these words helpful in understanding the major convergence as well as differences between the two philosophers and between the two traditions of which they are exemplary figures.

Such seventeenth-century intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm for things Chinese were soon discarded as naive and outmoded, particularly during the nineteenth century, when European colonial powers overran Asia and looked down upon China as an old and stagnant civilization, fundamentally different from the progressive West. Hegel gave this Eurocentric view a philosophical articulation, whereas Kipling captured its spirit in his famous line,"Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,"even though the exaggerated cultural dichotomy expressed here never quite succeeded to persuade. Given this genealogy of ideas, it is not surprising that early China and ancient Greece are mostly kept apart in much of modern scholarship. When they are brought together at all, they are sharply contrasted to highlight the "uniqueness" of cultural systems, or to satisfy the desire for the aesthetic appeal of cultural difference, what Victor Segalen called the sinophile's exoticism: "the notion of the different; the perception of the diverse; the recognition that something is not oneself" (23). In effect, Greece and China have often been considered the classic example of opposites in culture and tradition.

It is only in the last decade or so that important works have emerged that challenge the predominant idea of an East-West dichotomy by arguing for the value of comparative

studies of early China and ancient Greece. For example, the works of G.E.R. Lloyd—*Demystifying Mentalities* (1990), *Adversaries and Authorities* (1996), and *The Ambitions of Curiosity* (2002)—all demonstrate with erudition and authority the merits of bringing Chinese and Greek science and philosophy out of isolation in fruitful comparisons. In literary studies, Steven Shankman and Stephen Durrant have tried to make a case for comparative study of ancient Chinese and Greek cultures. In their first collaborative book, *The Siren and the Sage: Knowledge and Wisdom in Ancient Greece and China* (2000), they assert the necessity of comparative studies against "isolationism and the Balkanization of humanity into discrete cultural entities" and set their goal "to investigate equivalent figurations or symbolisms rather than to produce a sweeping set of contrasts between East and West" (2, 7). They achieved that goal admirably through innovative readings of classical texts of Greek and Chinese literature, history, and philosophy, always with a view to bringing them into mutual illumination.

In the book under review here, Shankman and Durrant gather together a group of scholars who have all tried to understand Chinese culture or the Greek tradition by going beyond the boundaries of sinology or Greco-Roman classics, and among whom we find some of the best scholars working today in the emerging field of East-West studies. As a diverse group, these scholars do not speak in one voice, but the thirteen essays collected here, written independently of one another, seem to carry on an interesting dialogue when read in tandem. The subtitle of the volume, *Thinking through Comparisons,* is perhaps inspired by *Thinking through Confucius,* the collaborative work by David Hall and Roger Ames, both of whom are contributors to this volume. The book begins with Hall's plea for cooperation between sinologists and philosophers and a critique of "the rather sharp division between traditional sinology and the more imaginative forms of philosophy" (19). To translate a Chinese philosophical text well, says Hall, you need a philosopher's expertise more than a sinologist's linguistic competence.

The call for cooperation and comparison sets up an appropriate framework for the book's project, but Hall himself is more interested in contrasts than comparisons. He cites F.S.C. Northrop's "wonderfully insightful contrasts," in particular the distinction "between 'concepts by postulation' and 'concepts by intuition' (the former dominating Western speculation, whereas the latter are central to Asian cultures)" (21). He also mentions the contrast between "logical" and "aesthetic" modes of understanding, the former emphasizing order, causality, and unity, the latter challenging logical order by focusing on "process, plurality, and particularity over substance, unity, and universality." The contrast between the two modes, says Hall, not only helps characterize "the general shift of emphasis from modern to postmodern or late-modern sensibilities," but also explains the "perceived differences between the shapes of understanding in Chinese and Western cultures" (25). Thus, in thinking through comparisons or, rather, through contrastive mental constructs, the "unique" nature of cultures is revealed in a series of oppositions such as intuition vs. postulation, aesthetic vs. logical, particularism vs. universalism, plurality vs. unity, postmodern vs. modern, all of which simultaneously define the conceived essences of China and Greece, or Asia and the West, in neat contrastive categories.

But that contrastive view is immediately called into question by Haun Saussy in the next chapter. By briefly revisiting linguistic structuralism and its emphasis on binary oppositions, Saussy reminds us that phonemic and other differences become meaningful only within the self-contained system of a particular language. In East-West studies, however, we cannot presuppose that China and Greece come under the same system, and therefore binary oppositions or contrasts cannot be taken for granted. Those who set up binary oppositions between China and Greece must therefore first construct an imaginary "system" in which the contrasts they set up will work, indeed will necessarily work,

because the "system" and the differences it generates will reinforce one another in a circular movement.

Like David Hall, Saussy also discusses Northrop's work, but he places it in a larger context of history and theoretical speculations from Hegel to the present, thus giving the reader a better perspective from which to see the connections among ideas and the pitfalls of a "typology" that assigns to China and Greece contrastive attributes without paying much attention to the history and internal complexity of each of these traditions. In a short chapter with a condensed argument, Saussy gives brilliant readings of the Hegelian philosophy of history and its critique in Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other*, and of Giuseppe Ferrari's fascinating idea of a global history that correlates China with Europe in an endless cycle of strife and change. In this context, Northrop's work can be seen as yet another attempt to map the world's civilizations as distinct cultural forms, with China representing the "aesthetic" and the West the "theoretic." But Northrop's "aesthetic" and "theoretic" civilizations are not only different, but also hierarchical. "Aesthetic experience," as Saussy remarks, "is a primary datum from which theoretic calculations emerge because theory negates the particularities of the former intuitions; one could not say in the same way that the theoretic forms a basis for the aesthetic." For Northrop, then, the "aesthetic" Orient preserves "the primitive intuitions of the past" in the same way that museums keep ancient treasures to be appreciated, but also surpassed, by the modern West (44).

Published in 1946, Northrop's *Meeting of East and West* did not shy away from modernist and Orientalist inclinations. Beginning with A.C. Graham's publications in the mid-1980s, however, as Saussy observes, many scholars have argued that "all the early philosophers of China are postmodern figures, or at least candidate postmoderns, because their thinking does not involve the foundational hypotheses of substance, of truth, or of a transcendental origin" (45). From seeing China as premodern to seeing it as postmodern is indeed a tremendous change in attitude, but the basic idea of China or Chinese culture as "aesthetic" and without the typical Western "foundational hypotheses" of substance, truth, etc. continues the familiar argument in Northrop and even earlier Western conceptualizations of the Orient. Saussy comments on the works of David Hall and Roger Ames and questions their effort to set up China as offering pure differences or alternatives. "*An alternative for whom*?" asks Saussy, and this is, for Hall and Ames, "(as for Northrop) again an appropriate question" (47). Among the scholars Saussy discusses, perhaps the most consistent and prolific practitioner of contrastive philosophy is François Jullien, who finds in early Chinese thinkers "repeatedly (indeed repetitively) the negation of a certain ready-made history of Western philosophy. China furnishes 'an absolutely contrary contrary' to European assumptions" (47). In fact, Jullien repeats the familiar argument of cultural contrasts between early China and ancient Greece to such a degree that his "regular, correlated oppositions transform the 'other' into 'our other,' which is to say, into a negative portrait of ourselves (or a certain understanding of ourselves)" (49). Thus China as a negative portrait invariably reflects the lack of something quintessentially Western, and in this respect there is little change from Hegel to Jullien because—if I may paraphrase Oscar Wilde here—the modernist disliking of China and the postmodernist liking of China are all the same rage of the West not seeing its own face in the glass. Saussy's recommendation to take a historical perspective is helpful: "Typology in isolation from history," he cautions us, constitutes "the greatest obstacle to 'thinking through comparisons'—not to making comparisons, to be sure, but to thinking through them" (50).

Oppositional typology or stereotypical imagery of China as a contrast to the West does tend to blind us to the convergence of insights and ideas that have arisen in very different social and historical conditions. Not that we should always look for affinities and

convergences at the expense of cultural differences, but we should be aware that a systematic dichotomy of China and Greece generates predictable contrasts and precludes meaningful comparisons. Roger Ames's contribution to this volume may serve as a reminder. He begins by proposing a fairly pertinent question—"What is 'Confucianism'?"—and proceeds to point out the diverse and even contradictory ways of answering that question in recent Chinese history. This may not be surprising, as there are just as many ways of understanding Platonism or Kantianism. Not so, according to Ames, for the very question of "What" is the wrong question to ask with regard to Confucianism: "*What* is a question prompted by assumptions about the systematic nature of philosophy, where objective truth and reality can and need to be grasped from behind a world of changing appearances. *What* tends to privilege ontological questions over historical and cosmological considerations and theoretical understanding over more practical concerns" (94). But as part of an "aesthetic" culture, Chinese philosophy in Ames's view does not concern itself with system, truth, reality, ontology, or theory—precisely those concepts and categories presupposed by the exclusively Western consideration of a *What* question. Ames sets up a typical dichotomy between China and Greece along the lines of aesthetic/theoretic, abstract/concrete, representational/performative, and so forth without giving sufficient consideration to the diversity and internal differences within each of these traditions. Towards the end of his essay, he gives a woefully inadequate reading of the ancient Chinese lexicon *Shuowen* for the understanding of some terms and comes to the conclusion that, in contrast to a Greek, a Chinese person is hardly an identifiable human being: "that instead of positing some intrinsically residing feature, some self-same identical characteristic that qualifies all human beings as members of a natural human kind, [Chinese] persons, like words, are to be understood by exploring relevant associations that constitute their specific patterns of meaningful relationships" (107-08). Essentially, Ames argues that while a Westerner is an individual self, a Chinese is not, but Mencius, a major figure in the Confucian tradition, famously said that "All the ten thousand things are there in me. There is no greater joy for me than to find, on self-examination, that I am true to myself" (7.A.4.182). No matter how you look at it, this passage speaks of the self as encompassing the entire universe, and it speaks of self-examination and being true to one's self. Elsewhere Mencius also argues for an intrinsically good human nature. It is possible that those inclined to see contrasts between China and the West may protest that this translation is seriously mangled because of the use of such English words as "me," "self," and "true to myself," which make the Chinese text falsely seem to contain such notions. If so, contrastive philosophy would appear to lead towards the impossibility of communication across cultures and languages, the radical untranslatability not just of languages, but of basic conceptualizations as well. In effect, it would make "thinking through comparisons" impossible.

Of course, most contributors to this book do not embark on such a self-defeating course. Michael Puett takes on one of the contrasts commonly made between Greece and China with regard to their cosmologies, namely the idea that the tragic cosmology of the Greeks assumed "an inherently agonistic relationship" between humans and gods, while "early Chinese cosmology emphasized continuity between the human and the divine realms" (56). By examining the internal diversity of each of these traditions and through careful readings of Empedocles, on the Greek side—whose cosmology was "in direct opposition to the claims of a separation between humans and gods" (61)—and a significant passage from the *Guoyu*, on the Chinese side—which "is explicitly oriented toward defining humans and spirits as, normatively, separate" (65)—Puett shows clearly that contrastive generalizations about Greek and Chinese cosmologies and religious beliefs tend to be simplistic, reductionist, and untenable. The point is, however, not just to show that there

are convergences as well as differences, but to contextualize tensions and concerns that are common to both Greek and Chinese cultures and examine them in their particular historical circumstances. Puett calls for critical attention to be paid to individuals and their texts as responses to historical circumstances, but he also cautions us not to reduce entire traditions to individual opinions, not "to read a given statement concerning the correlation of humans and spirits made in a single text as necessarily reflective of the beliefs of the time" (71).

Co-editor Steven Shankman's essay in this volume shows a strong commitment to the comparative project, clearly understood as an antidote to the danger in East-West comparative studies of "stereotyping one culture in relation to the other, each of which is assumed to have an identifiable essence" (83). By reading important passages from Chinese and Greek philosophical texts, Shankman persuasively argues that, in very different articulations, the Chinese philosophers Laozi and Zhuangzi and the Greek philosopher Plato are all concerned with the question of language and its relationship to philosophical truth or reality. The opening verses of the *Dao de jing* make it clear that the *dao* is ineffable, that in their undifferentiated original state, heaven and earth are nameless, and that it is naming, the human effort to differentiate and identify, that brings all things into conceptual existence. To understand the power of naming or language and yet to realize its limitations, to be aware of the mystery between having an intention and having no intention, says Shankman, constitute "the wisdom of the sage" (78). In *Symposium,* Plato is also concerned with the idea of philosophizing as "as much the product of a profound awareness of one's ignorance as it is of an intentionalist seeking" (86). Thus the three philosophers come together as contemplating the same problem in different ways: "Plato, Laozi, and Zhuangzi need a language that will try to keep up with the flux, that will be self-conscious about its own historically emergent referents," says Shankman. "All three thinkers, in other words, want a language responsive to the participatory dimension of reality, to the sense that the intending consciousness is itself always a part of the reality that it is attempting to know" (87).

Given the fact that Laozi or Confucius, on the one hand, and Plato, on the other, are often evoked to exemplify the "fundamental differences" between China and Greece, Shankman's argument that Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Plato "come forth together, but are differently named" takes a particularly important step in promoting East-West comparative studies. It is definitely a step in the right direction, for it is important to think through comparisons between early China and ancient Greece, even though we may realize, as Shankman does, that it is an open and never-ending process, a difficult task worthy of all our endeavors.

David Keightley's discussion of disguise and deception in early China and ancient Greece, however, presents a picture very different from Shankman's. For Keightley, Odysseus is the representative of the Greeks' preoccupation with disguise and deception that is indicative of their "epistemological pessimism," the idea that senses and appearance are unreliable. In early China, on the other hand, there are "qualities of epistemological optimism, qualities that, for the human or physical realms, we might refer to as 'representational optimism'. . . an optimism about the general reliability of appearances and about man's ability to take reality for granted" (127). Keightley draws examples from *Zuozhuan* and a few other texts, but one can easily draw from other classic texts for counterexamples. Laozi, for instance, complained that "My words are very easy to understand and very easy to put into practice, yet no one in the world can understand them or put them into practice. . . . Therefore the sage, while clad in homespun, conceals on his person a priceless piece of jade" (Lao tzu 132). Mencius also complained about the difficulty for most people to know the *dao* or the Way when he said, "The Way lies at hand yet it is

sought afar off; the thing lies in the easy yet it is sought in the difficult" (4.A.11.122). These hardly sound like confident articulations of a Chinese "epistemological optimism." The point is that textual examples are easy to collect, but one should avoid using them as proof of essential qualities of an entire culture or tradition. Lisa Raphals has studied a variety of classical Chinese and Greek texts with special reference to *mētis* or cunning knowledge and has arrived at a very different conclusion. In both Greece and China, she argues, there is a "distrust appearance" point of view, which holds that "the categories of language impede, rather than facilitate, the acquisition of true knowledge. Taoist and Militarist texts and the Greek extraphilosophical tradition on *mētis* are all concerned with a realm of shifting particulars that can be apprehended and described only indirectly and with skill and cunning" (227). Keightley is certainly correct to say that classical Chinese texts are much less elaborately descriptive than Greek texts, particularly the Homeric epics, and that "The Chinese narratives, when compared with the Greek, are remarkable for the lack of dramatic complexity" (141). We should be careful, however, not to expand this into a contrast between China and the West, because within the Western tradition itself, as Erich Auerbach noted long ago, there also exists the contrast between the fully externalized Homeric text, on the one hand, and the obscurity of the Old Testament—unexpressed, "mysterious and 'fraught with background,'" on the other (11-12).

That is just what David Schaberg cautions at the end of his discussion of the "logic of signs" in early Chinese texts. "The logic of signs does not permit a wholesale distinction of 'Chinese' modes of argumentation from 'Greek' modes," he says, even though "it does account for certain continuities in pre-Qin historiographical and philosophical texts" (181). What he means by the "logic of signs," a term borrowed from Aristotle, is a sort of symbolic logic that presents an argument by way of concrete examples and analogies, rather than by syllogistic reasoning based on abstract principles. *Zuozhuan* and *Mencius* are Schaberg's main texts for discussion. Mencius maintains, for example, that each human being possesses the innate roots of moral virtues, namely the four starting-points of humaneness, rightness, dutifulness, and wisdom. Instead of presenting a syllogistic argument for this claim, however, he offers a hypothetical case of a child about to fall into a well and declares that all human beings under such circumstances would immediately grab the child to save its life. "Analogies allow illustrations," Schaberg comments, "but preclude arguments" (176). But analogies do serve the purpose of argument here, because it is from such hypothetical cases that concepts like humaneness and rightness are deduced, and in the use of analogies or concrete signs Mencius is not so very different from, say, Plato in using the cave image as an analogy of knowledge and ignorance, or Jesus in using parables as a powerful means of teaching.

Careful comparison does not mean ignoring important differences. Andrew Plaks's fine analysis of the Aristotelian *Ethics* and the Confucian *Doctrine of the Mean* reveals some intriguing similarities, but also acknowledges "the markedly more rigorous preoccupation with logical method and in particular mathematical reasoning in classic Greek philosophy" than in Chinese (200). Similarly, Anthony Yu's discussion of names or naming in the Platonic dialogue *Cratylus* and a chapter of *Xunzi* shows the "obvious disparity of language" between Greece and China. "The Socratic attempt to pin down the correct meaning of words resorts to both semantic and phonological etymologies," says Yu, but Chinese definitions of names often turn on homophonic associations, which really become "definitions by punning" (239). More importantly, Chinese discussions of names often lead to a moralistic understanding of language and society, while Greek concerns are more neutrally linguistic and representational. "Whereas nature (*xing*) and disposition (*qing*) in Xunzi represent human attitudes that are only by extension applicable to

the myriad things, the Socratic interest is trained on things as they are in themselves, a condition for which the names of essence (*ousia*) and nature (*physis*) provide the clearest indication" (242). Differences here are articulated through a carefully balanced examination of textual details, but they are not generalized into contrasts between entire cultures and traditions.

There are several other essays in this volume that merit more discussion than the limited space of a review allows. C.H. Wang's reflection on poetic allusions draws on both Chinese and Greek sources; Lisa Raphals's examination of fate and fatalism in Greece and China offers a wide range of rich materials and many insights useful in other areas of East-West comparative studies; and Michael Nylan's discussion of elite women in the Achaemenid and Han empires provides a more sensitive reading of historical texts than what the commonly held views would lead us to understand. Finally, Stephen Durrant, the other co-editor of this volume, reads the works of the great Chinese historian Sima Qian against the commonly held Chinese-Greek contrast that Michael Puett discusses with regard to the relationship between humans and gods, but here it concerns the relationship between historians and their predecessors—the contrast between "the notoriously agonistic Greeks and the irenic Chinese" (283). Compared with Thucydides, who established his own credibility as a historian by putting down Homer and Herodotus, Sima Qian seems to have boundless reverence for tradition and the authority of the ancients, and, following the example of Confucius, he declares with modesty that he only "transmitted and did not create" (284). However, while this contrast between Greek and Chinese historians' attitudes toward their predecessors seems clear cut, as is usually the case, says Durrant, "when we attempt to engage in comparison and contrast, the story is always more complicated than it initially seems" (286).

First of all, family genealogy was important for Sima Qian as a historian, and he justified his writing of the voluminous history by citing his father's deathbed command to finish what he had left unaccomplished in his office as the Grand Historian. That dramatic account, however, needs to be analyzed, and an autobiographical justification, as Durrant observes, "is typically motivated by a trauma or a life-changing episode that makes sense out of all that has preceded it" (290). In Sima Qian's case, the traumatic experience was his castration as punishment for his plea on behalf of a disgraced general, Li Ling, in 99 B.C.E. Having suffered such extreme humiliation, it might be nobler for a man to take his own life rather than to live on as, in Sima Qian's own words, "a remnant of saw and blade." And yet, he chose to live "to finish the family masterpiece, *Shi ji*, and trusts us, his latter-day readers, to rehabilitate his reputation" (289). By questioning the veracity of the deathbed scene described by Sima Qian himself, Durrant is not suggesting that Sima Qian's account has no basis in actual events, but that "those events will always lay hidden behind the psychological trauma and the literary effusions of Sima Qian himself" (291). In other words, the Grand Historian's emphasis on family genealogy and respect for his father's wish serve a crucial psychological purpose in his personal life rather than reveal the general character of "the irenic Chinese." There is more to it than just the idea of a seemingly conservative and reverent Chinese mentality would explain.

When we read the Grand Historian's masterpiece *Shi ji* in comparison with earlier historical writings like *Chun qiu* or *Zuozhuan*, we are immediately impressed by Sima Qian's innovations and more fully developed literary sensibilities. The difference here, as Durrant remarks, "could hardly be more striking" (290). Why does Sima Qian, then, like so many other scholars and writers in the Chinese tradition, declare that he only transmits and does not create anything? Here again, Durrant reminds us, there is more to the seemingly modest attitude than the idea of a reverent mentality. "The point is," he argues, "that the claim in China of being only a transmitter or, for that matter, of being an inno-

vator, should rarely be taken at face value" (294). Given the status and authority of Confucius in the Chinese tradition, it is not exactly a very modest gesture to declare that you are a transmitter when that has always been known as the hallmark of Confucius's self-description. Perhaps a comparable case in the West is Dante in his letter to Can Grande della Scala, because when he declared that his *Commedia* should be read on four different levels with different meanings, he was elevating his own work of secular literature to the same revered place as the Holy Scripture. So in the end, Sima Qian emerges from this chapter not as an agonistic historian like Thucydides, but neither is he "a simple image of a filial son who follows a well-established family tradition of historiography, nor [is he] an unstinting admirer of Confucius who devotedly adheres to the tradition of *Chun qiu* and remains confined by acts of straightforward transmission" (294). Durrant's reading of Sima Qian destabilizes the simplistic contrast between the Greek and the Chinese without erasing real differences in the ways in which Greek and Chinese historians responded to their predecessors in style and in execution. What the reader gets is a richer and more nuanced understanding of the works of this great Chinese historian in comparison with his Greek counterparts, and that is exactly what good comparative work should achieve. As a whole, *Early China/Ancient Greece* is a rich volume that tries to achieve such a goal, and it does often help increase our understanding of these two great cultural traditions. Its significance as a whole may be larger than the discussion of particular Greek and Chinese texts of various kinds, for it may indicate a new trend of moving beyond the usual boundaries of comparative literature in the West, and contribute to the expansion of our horizon into an exciting new area of East-West comparative studies.

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